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BOOK REVIEWS

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Familial Cancer Management. Editors W Weber, J J Mulvihill, S A Narod. (Pp 246; £99.00.) UK: CRC Press. 1996. ISBN 0-849-34782-3.

This relatively expensive book is an interesting addition to the expanding body of publications dealing with familial predisposition to cancer. The subject is broad and covered fairly comprehensively. However, the book left me with the impression of a collection of papers written in isolation by experts in the same broad field. This leads to some repetition of basic themes from chapter to chapter. I was unsure at whom the book is aimed. Read as a book from cover to cover the contents would give the reader a good idea of the controversies and variation in clinical practice which is the inevitable result of the still limited clinical research data available in much of this field. The subject matter, of course, leaves ample room for individual opinion as it is an evolving field. Although perhaps not the primary aim of the book, the differences in opinions and the differences in clinical practice in different health care systems came across well by reading the entire book. However, I felt using this as a reference text for clinical practice would be difficult. The book led me to reflect once more on the differences between health care in the different countries.

Certainly there is a wealth of information here with some excellent chapters and some perhaps less accessible chapters. Many of the contributors balance appropriately their own protocols for best clinical practice in their setting with contrary views, such as the unproven benefit of many of the advocated screening activities provoked by identification of a cancer predisposition in a person. In some situations where the natural history is understood and the screening strategy is proven to reduce mortality (such as for familial adenomatous polyposis), screening strategies and prophylactic surgery are generally agreed and accepted. In, for example, genetic predisposition to breast cancer the case remains to be proven for either screening or prophylactic surgery. More emphasis on the need for collaborative studies to address some of these issues would redress the balance.

There are chapters covering some basic laboratory techniques in which the genetic terminology would present difficulties for a reader unfamiliar with basic molecular biology. There are some good balanced overview chapters. However, since there is no apparant specific target audience and the arrangement of the information does not lend itself to use as a reference text, as the field moves on and expands even further, a subsequent edition may need a slightly different approach.

There are some interesting and wide ranging chapters, for example, on the legal and ethical issues raised by the discovery of cancer predisposition genes, which add interest to a wide range of potential readers. Although this book may be a useful addition to the departmental library, the high cost and the layout of the book would make me hesitate to recommend it for personal use.

DIANA M ECCLES

Etiology and Pathogenesis of Down Syndrome. Progress in Clinical and Biological Research Volume 393. Editors Charles J Epstein *et al.* (Pp 260; £85.00.) UK: Wiley-Liss. 1995. ISBN 0-471-12317-X.

This book is a typical product of the proceedings of a meeting that was held in Charleston, South Carolina, in April 1994 and sponsored by the National Down Syndrome Society. The theme of the meeting was to discuss the latest developments on the aetiology and pathogenesis of Down syndrome, which is a compilation of phenotypes resulting from three copies (instead of two) of genes that map to human chromosome 21. The field of aneuploidy and gene dosage is fascinating, challenging, and ready for discoveries. The exploration of the genome of chromosome 21 will undoubtedly provide some answers to the aetiology and pathophysiology of certain phenotypes. However, the full understanding of the gene to phenotype process will probably come a long time after the cloning and characterisation of all chromosome 21 genes.

The book contains chapters from numerous authors or groups of authors that vary widely in topic and quality. Some of the chapters describe the results of many years of investigations and the data could well be part of textbook discussions. Other chapters, in particular those that describe mapping information, are outdated because of the extensive amount of new information that accumulates rapidly. The chapter on the cognitive abilities in Down syndrome is an important addition to this book and deals with a topic that the methodological biologist does not usually find in his/her publications. The methodological chapters provide a nice account of approaches to studying the effects of trisomy in model organisms or mammalian cells.

The book is interesting to those who are students of aneuploidy and gene imbalance. It is also of interest to neurologists, geneticists, biologists, and behavioural paediatricians. I particularly liked the closing chapter (epilogue) that contained a personal view (that of Dr C Epstein) of how far we have come and how far we can reasonably expect to go. I fully agree with his predictive remarks. It is my impression that after the understanding of the majority of monogenic disorders, trisomy 21 will again come to a prominent position in the stage of problems that the human biologist would tackle with the tools of whole genome analysis.

STYLIANOS E ANTONARAKIS

Starting and Sustaining Genetic Support Groups. Joan O Weiss, Jayne S Mackta. (Pp 153; £33.00 hb, £15.50 pb.) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 1996. ISBN 0-8018-5264-1.

This book aims to provide practical guidance to lay people or genetics professionals on starting a genetic support group or working with an existing one. A key theme is the importance of partnership between professionals and families based on mutual respect and the effective use of their different contributions. Weiss is the director of the US Alliance of Genetic Support Groups, and the authors take a realistic and practical approach to the subject, with an understanding of both the potential and the pitfalls.

An overview is given of the benefits and limitations of genetic support groups. The authors stress their value in breaking down isolation, particularly after diagnosis, and in enabling communication with people who have gone through similar experiences. They also emphasise that groups cannot solve all problems, and the importance of referral to professionals when needed. They examine common difficulties and conflicts, which can limit a group's ability to give support, and how to deal with these.

There is practical advice on how to organise a genetic support group. This covers getting started, setting goals, finding people, assessing people's need (with a useful checklist), developing group leadership, and avoiding burnout and other problems. The book gives guidance on developing peer support; the role of professionals in working with the group; communication and publications; organising meetings and support sessions; fundraising; and taking part in research.

While written from a US perspective, this clearly written basic guide is a useful resource for anyone involved in setting up or working with a genetic support group. It includes a comprehensive listing of US genetic support groups, genetic services, and other resources.

JANE BELMAN